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SUBJECT: IRANIAN DEPFORMIN ARAGHCHI DEFENDS NUCLEAR PROGRAM
AT UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Speaking July 4 at the University of Pretoria, Iranian DepForMin Araghchi argued that Iran's nuclear program is peaceful, but stressed that Tehran will not give up its NPT right to enrich uranium. Iran remains open to "creative" ideas on building confidence about the peaceful nature of its program, such as a joint venture on enrichment. Iran was "a little disappointed" by South Africa's UNSC vote for sanctions on Iran. Araghchi said Iran was willing to meet with the United States again on Iraq to "help the Iraqi government and people." During his trip to South Africa, Araghchi reportedly met SAG DepForMin Aziz Pahad, likely to lobby for support in the UNSC. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Dr. Abbas Araghchi, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs, addressed a group of approximately 50 diplomats, academics, and journalists at the University of Pretoria on July 4. The U.K.-educated Araghchi spoke in English for approximately one hour. Hussein Solomon, Director of the Centre for International Political Studies (CiPS), told PolOff that the Iranians requested the public forum on short notice, and that Araghchi had met with South African DepForMin Aziz Pahad. Araghchi's meeting with Pahad was not publicly announced by the South African Government. Araghchi also attended part of the July 2-6 meeting of the Asian-African Legal Consultative Organization, held in Cape Town.

Defense of Nuclear Program

¶3. (U) Araghchi devoted most of his remarks to "clarifying" the purpose of the Iranian nuclear program, repeating at length the standard Iranian talking points.

-- The Iranian nuclear program has a long history, stretching back to the 1957 U.S.-Iranian agreement to develop nuclear energy. Only after the revolution did the West begin to express concerns about Iran's intentions.

-- Iran needs nuclear energy for its long-term development. Its oil and gas reserves will decline over time. Iran wants to be "independent" in its nuclear energy program, so as to not rely on other countries. This encompasses all stages of production, including enrichment.

-- Iran remains committed to the NPT and IAEA safeguards

agreements. Because of its "inexperience," Iran failed at times to report certain issues to the IAEA, but these have all been "corrected." The IAEA has confirmed that Iran has "corrected all failings." The Agency has not been able to say there are no "undeclared" nuclear activities, but this will take time "since Iran is a big country;" it took 40 years to certify Japan.

-- Iran will never give up its right under the NPT to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. Tehran was willing to negotiate with the E-3 to "prove" its peaceful intent, but instead learned a "bitter lesson" from the Europeans who, when asking Iran to suspend its enrichment activities, instead meant cessation. The E-3 package of proposals were full of "empty promises," some even "ridiculous" and "insulting," such as providing better Internet to Iran.

-- The imposition of UNSC sanctions on Iran is "not surprising." The Iranian people are "willing to pay the price" to establish their right to develop a peaceful nuclear program.

-- Iran is willing to explore "creative" and "constructive" ideas to provide assurances about the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. Araghchi suggested, for example, that Iran would be willing to consider a joint venture on its enrichment activities (NFI), as long as the activities take place on Iranian soil. Tehran is open to suggestions on "building confidence" between the West and Iran.

Disappointed by South African UNSC Vote

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¶4. (U) Araghchi said Tehran was "a little disappointed" by the South African support for the UNSC resolution imposing sanctions on Iran. They appreciated Pretoria's efforts to amend the resolution and noted that many of South Africa's amendments had been accepted. Araghchi added that overall relations between South Africa and Iran were "good," and they appreciated Pretoria's advice on "how to deal with the constant pressure."

Ahmadi-Nejad's Comments on Israel

¶5. (U) Asked about President Ahmadi-Nejad's call for the end of the state of Israel, Araghchi argued that Iranian policy has been misunderstood. Tehran supports a "one-state solution" for all the people of "Palestine." They do not believe a two state solution will work. If all the inhabitants of "Palestine" vote for a system of government that results in the end of the "Zionist regime," that is "their problem, not ours." Iran has the right to present its formula for peace in the Middle East, like any other government. He later added that the existence of the Israeli nuclear program exposes the "double standard" of the West and represents the real threat to the region.

Willing to Meet U.S. Again on Iraq

¶6. (U) On Iraq, Araghchi said Iran was willing to hold another round of talks with the United States to "help the Iraqi people and government." He said the United States is in a "desperate position" and urged Washington to announce an "exit plan." Araghchi called for "strengthening" of the Iraqi political structures, including PM Maliki, since there is no alternative "for the moment." The policy and army should also be supported and given more authority independent of the United States military.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) As Araghchi frankly admitted, the Iranians were no doubt disappointed by South Africa's UNSC vote in favor of sanctions. Araghchi likely took advantage of his presence in South Africa for the Cape Town legal conference to lobby DepForMin Pahad on future UNSC action. Araghchi's public presentation to press, diplomats, and academics -- unusual for high-level Iranian visitors -- suggests that Iran may be attempting to use public diplomacy to influence SAG policy on the Iranian nuclear question.

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